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Spotlight on Legal Immigration to the United States

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This updated Spotlight takes a close look at the statistics on immigrants or foreign nationals admitted for and adjusted to lawful permanent residence (LPR).

One of the most commonly used publications on US immigration statistics is *The Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, published by the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS).

The Yearbook presents inflow statistics on foreign nationals who, during a fiscal year (FY):

- 1. were granted lawful permanent residence (ie, immigrants);
- 2. applied for and/or were granted refugee/asylee status;
- 3. were admitted on a temporary basis (ie, nonimmigrants);
- 4. acquired US citizenship (ie, naturalized).

The *Yearbook* also presents information about DHS's immigration law enforcement activities during a fiscal year. To expedite the release of the immigration data, in 2004 OIS started publishing Annual Flow reports on the number and characteristics of the above-mentioned groups of foreign nationals. This Spotlight uses data from both the *Yearbook* and Annual Flow reports.

Note: all yearly data is for the government's fiscal year (October 1 through September 30).

Click on the bullet points below for more information:

- According to US immigration law, immigrants are persons lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the United States.
- The law provides for three, general immigrant categories: family reunification, employment sponsorship, and humanitarian cases (refugee and asylum adjustments).
- The total yearly inflow of immigrants in these categories is composed of both new arrivals to the United States and status adjusters.
- The number of new arrivals remained relatively stable at about 400,000 annually between 1986 and 2005.
- More than one million people were granted lawful permanent resident status in 2005.
- Family reunification accounted for almost 58 percent of all lawful permanent immigration in 2005.
- Employment-preference immigrants accounted for about 22 percent of all lawful permanent immigration in 2005.
- In 2005, nearly 13 percent of all lawful permanent residents were status adjusters who entered as refugees or asylees.
- There were about 83,000 "other immigrants" in 2005.
- Mexico, India, China, the Philippines, and Cuba are the top five countries of birth of lawful permanent residents in 2005.
- California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois are the key destinations for many lawful permanent residents.

According to US immigration law, immigrants are persons lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the United States.

Also known as "green-card holders," immigrants are persons lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the United States. The Department of Homeland Security Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) also refers to immigrants as aliens who are granted lawful permanent residence (LPR), aliens admitted for lawful permanent residence, immigrants admitted, and admissions. In contrast, foreign students, H-1B workers, and tourists are part of the large category of temporary nonimmigrant admissions.

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The law provides for three, general immigrant categories: family reunification, employment sponsorship, and humanitarian cases (refugee and asylum adjustments). The majority of people who wish to obtain lawful permanent residence or a "green card" in the United States qualify because they are a family member of a US citizen or lawful permanent resident, the employee of a US company, or a refugee or asylum seeker who has been granted protection in the US.

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The number of all immigrants admitted to the country shown in the immigration statistics tables consists of two different types of flow. One is newly arrived lawful permanent residents — persons who were issued immigrant visas by the Department of State overseas. The other is status adjusters — persons who enter the United States in one legal status and then adjust or change to permanent residence while in the country.

For example, a person arrives in the United States on a temporary worker H-1B visa. If her company chooses to sponsor her for permanent residence, the employer can petition US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) for a green card on behalf of the worker under an employment-preference visa.

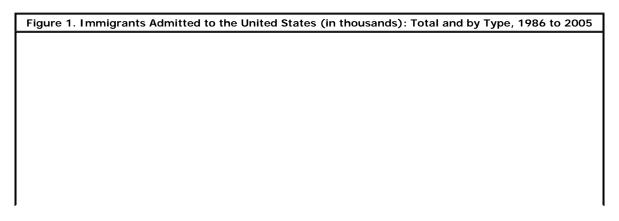
If she meets the criteria and if annual, numerical ceilings for employment-preference visas have not been met, she will receive a card stating she is lawfully admitted for permanent residence. She is counted as a status adjuster for that year.

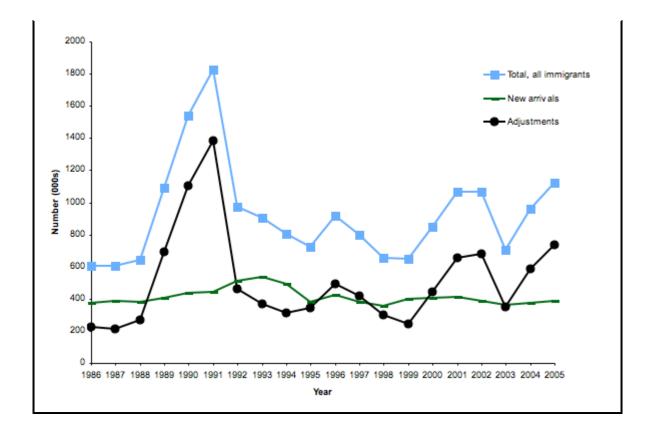
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The number of new arrivals remained relatively stable at about 400,000 annually between 1986 and 2005.

Although the number of adjustments has greatly varied between 1986 and 2005, the number of new arrivals has remained relatively stable at about 400,000 per year (see Figure 1). Processing problems with adjustments and backlogs at the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the current USCIS are primarily responsible for wide fluctuations in the total numbers.

At the end of 2005, about 900,000 adjustment-of-status applications were pending a decision. Thus, users should be cautious in interpreting LPR admission data.





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More than one million people were granted lawful permanent resident status during 2005.

There were 1,122,373 immigrants who were granted legal residence in 2005. Of those, 384,071 (34.2 percent) were new arrivals who entered the country in 2005, and 738,302 (65.8 percent) were status adjusters. The status adjusters arrived in the US in any year before 2005, but their applications were approved during 2005.

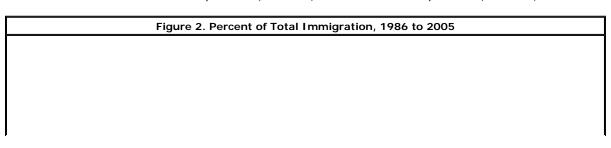
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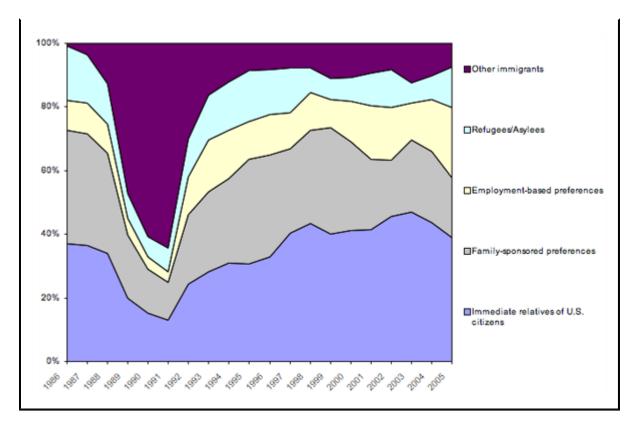
Family reunification accounted for almost 58 percent of all lawful permanent immigration in 2005.

Immigrants who obtained green cards as relatives of US citizens (436,231) and lawful permanent residents (212,970) accounted for 57.8 percent of all lawful permanent immigrants (see Figure 2). With the exception of the 1989 to 1994 period, family-based immigration since the mid-1980s has accounted for about two-thirds of total lawful permanent immigration.

The share of immediate relatives (spouses, children under 21, and parents) of US citizens varied between 13 percent (237,103) in 1991 and 47.1 percent (331,286) in 2003.

Family-preference immigrants include nonimmediate relatives (adult children and siblings) of US citizens and immediate family members of lawful permanent residents (spouses and children). Their share varied between 35.4 percent (212,939) in 1986 and 11.8 percent (216,088) in 1991.





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Employment-preference immigrants accounted for about 22 percent of all lawful permanent immigration in 2005.

The share of employment-preference immigrants is significantly smaller than that of family-based immigrants and has varied between 3.3 percent (59,525) in 1991 and 22 percent (246,878) in 2005 (see Figure 2). However, 132,964 (or 53.8 percent) of the employment-sponsored immigrants were spouses and children of principal applicants.

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In 2005, nearly 13 percent of all lawful permanent residents were status adjusters who entered as refugees or asylees.

(Note: these figures refer to those refugees and asylees who adjusted their status to lawful permanent resident in 2005. They do not refer to the numbers and percentages of refugee/asylum applicants granted refugee/asylum status.)

Refugees and asylees who adjusted their status to LPR in 2005 constituted 12.7 percent of all lawful permanent immigrants.

The number and percentage of refugee/asylee adjustments of status varied significantly between 1986 and 2005, from 6.3 percent (97,364) in 1990 to 17.3 percent (104,383) in 1986 (see Figure 2).

Refugees are eligible to adjust to LPR status, without regard to numerical limit, after one year of residence in the United States. Similarly, asylees have to wait one year after they are granted asylum to apply for LPR status. Until 2005, a limit of 10,000 asylee adjustments per year. The REAL ID Act of 2005 (enacted into law in May 2005) eliminated this 10,000 numerical limit.

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There were about 83,000 "other immigrants" in 2005.

Less numerous groups of immigrants, such as persons and their dependents who legalized under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, parolees, and diversity lottery winners, are examples of the "other immigrants" group. In 2005, there were 82,762 "other immigrants" who accounted for 7.4 percent of all legal immigrants.

About 56 percent of the "other immigrants" group in 2005 (46,234) were people who received their immigrant visas through the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program, also know as the Green Card Lottery. In contrast, 95.5 percent (1,123,162) of the "other immigrants" group in 1991 were people who became LPRs under the IRCA of 1986 (see Figure 2).

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Mexico, India, China, the Philippines, and Cuba are the top five countries of birth of lawful permanent residents in 2005.

The top five countries of birth — Mexico, India, China, the Philippines, and Cuba — accounted for 36.8 percent of all persons who received LPR status in 2005. Nationals of the next five countries — Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Korea, Colombia, and Ukraine — added another 12 percent of all LPRs so that the top 10 leading countries of birth made up almost 50 percent of the total (see Table 1).

Table 1. Legal Permanent Resident Flow by Country of Birth, FY 1995 and FY 2005 (Excel file)

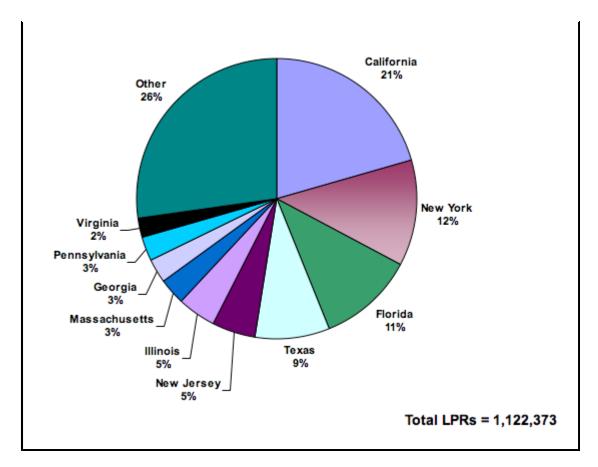
Similarly to 1995, the top 20 countries of birth in 2005 accounted for about two-thirds of all LPRs (see Table 1). Eighteen out of 20 countries remained on the top-20 country list in 2005 compared to 1995. Haiti and Taiwan fell out of the top 20 by 2005, while Brazil and Peru joined the list.

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California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois are the key destinations for many LPRs in 2005.

California was the intended state of residence for 20.7 percent of all admitted LPRs in 2005. Other leading states of intended residence included New York (12.2 percent), Florida (11.0 percent), Texas (8.5 percent), New Jersey (5.0 percent), and Illinois (4.7 percent). The top 10 states of destination — which also included Massachusetts, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Virginia — accounted for 72.9 percent of all LPRs (see Figure 3).





Additional Resources:

Immigration Statistics: Information Gaps, Quality Issues Limit Utility of Federal Data to Policymakers. GAO/GGD-98-164. **Available online**.

The Yearbook of Immigration Statistics and Annual Flow Report. Available online.

Definitions of terms can be found at the website of the Office of Immigration Statistics

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